

Epiphany Series: "God Shows the Way"
"I Am Because You Are—Umbutu:" 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

27 January 2013: 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

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"Each day provides its own gifts."

— Marcus Aurelius)—

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Let us get the question out of the way from the start. "Ubuntu" happens to be a Zulu (or perhaps Bantu) word which defines a southern African philosophy focusing on human relations. One definition of the word "Ubuntu" comes from a Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee who said it means: "I am what I am because of who we all are." As is an African philosophy this is Archbishop Desmond Tutu's definition from his 1999 book, *No Future without Forgiveness*:

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, based from a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

While Paul was not an African, he might have resonated with the concept of "Ubuntu." May we hear Paul on spiritual gifts, matters, or persons:

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a).

An article, “What Good Is a Tree?” in *Reader’s Digest* explained that when the roots of trees touch, there is a substance present that reduces competition. In fact, this unknown fungus helps link roots of different trees—even of dissimilar species. A whole forest may be linked together. If one tree has access to water, another to nutrients, and a third to sunlight, then the trees have the means to share with one another—and survive.

Like trees in the forest, community members need one another, and support one another. How wonderful it is when people in the community sustain one another. Whether it is a Children’s Book Fair, an Angel Tree Program, a Blood Drive, or a mentor program at Webb Elementary School, we all try to support the good things that make Arlington great!

We see the idea of “Ubuntu” from southern Africa and the idea of interlacing roots from trees as symbols of cooperation. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians employs the human body as a metaphor or a mark of mutual human support.

Paul tells the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit dispenses spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole community. Now Paul moves to the nature of the Church, comparing it to the human body. Whatever our differences, as Christians “we were all baptized into one body” and empowered by the same Holy Spirit acting in the Church. I suggest that verse 14 is central to Paul’s understanding: the body needs various members; so too the Church needs various spiritual gifts, each making its own impact. This means, in a nutshell,

that all members/individuals deliver in various ways a benefit to the whole. Diversity is rooted in, and contributes to, unity. Whether strong or weak we all need one another—at least according to the Apostle Paul.

Why should we as Christians embrace diversity and help people who are not so much like us? We do so because God first built diversity into creation from the beginning. Second diversity lets the church blend its gifts to meet human needs. Third we embrace diversity because Jesus embraced all kinds of different people.

Thus our question, “Why should we as Christians embrace diversity and help people who are not so much like us?” is not as far-fetched as it seems. There are three reasons why Christians adopt diversity—and thereby help others who differ from us. First God builds diversity into creation from the beginning. Like snowflakes, human beings’ DNA (Deoxyribonucleic acid) is absolutely unique with the exception of identical twins which are formed from one egg. As no two snowflakes are exactly alike so when a particular, minute snowflake melts, it is gone forever.

From the beginning God has created people as one of a kind. Our diversity is not a curse from which we need to recover. I remember my Grandmother, who was an elementary school teacher, telling my left-handed brother that when she was just beginning all teachers were instructed to make left-handed students into right-handed students. Perhaps some fifty years later we realize our differences make us not only more interesting, but also more functional as a society. One theological argument for diversity is God’s magnificent creation.

Second diversity lets the church blend its gifts and graces—perhaps we could call them talents and abilities—to meet the multitude of needs that the

gospel offers people. In diversity we practice discipleship by doing what Paul suggests to the church at Corinth. One of Paul's primary notions in today's lesson is that "the body does not consist of one member but of many." Paul then uses a live and physical body analogy for this congregation—as dissimilar, assorted, and diverse as it was—to use all of its gifts in order to share the gospel with a world in need.

Strange as it may seem, but first century Corinth was in some respects similar to modern New Orleans, LA. Each is a large thriving seaport city. They each had a oddly diverse population made up of people from everywhere. Each had a perhaps undeserved "decadent" or "sordid" reputation. Last, these cities had a wide range of human needs that needed relief. As God creates in the divine image, we are all members of the human race—as random as we may appear. Yet Paul gives us a word about discipleship: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). Thus God connects us in creation. God also calls us to help others, however diverse, because the gospel demands it. Diversity is our opportunity to extend the gospel and offer compassionate ministry to others.

Third of all, we embrace diversity in the human family because Jesus embraced all people despite their differences. Whether of good repute like Pharisees, scribes, priests, Sadducees, zealots, or the elders of the people; whether of bad reputation like prostitutes, tax collectors, shepherds, or other various sinners; Jesus treated all persons with the respect they warranted as God's creatures. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:4: "everything created by God is good, and nothing [or no one] is to be rejected." What divides righteous from

unrighteous, according to Jesus' Last Judgment parable (Mt 25), is simply how we regard the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or the one in prison.

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Charles Osgood told the story of two women who lived in a convalescent center. Each had suffered an incapacitating stroke. Margaret's stroke left her left side restricted, while Ruth's stroke damaged her right side. Both of these ladies were accomplished pianists but had given up hope of ever playing again. The director of the center sat them down at a piano and encouraged them to play solo pieces together. They did, and a beautiful friendship developed. What a picture of the church's need to work together! What one member cannot do alone, perhaps two or more could do together—in harmony.

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